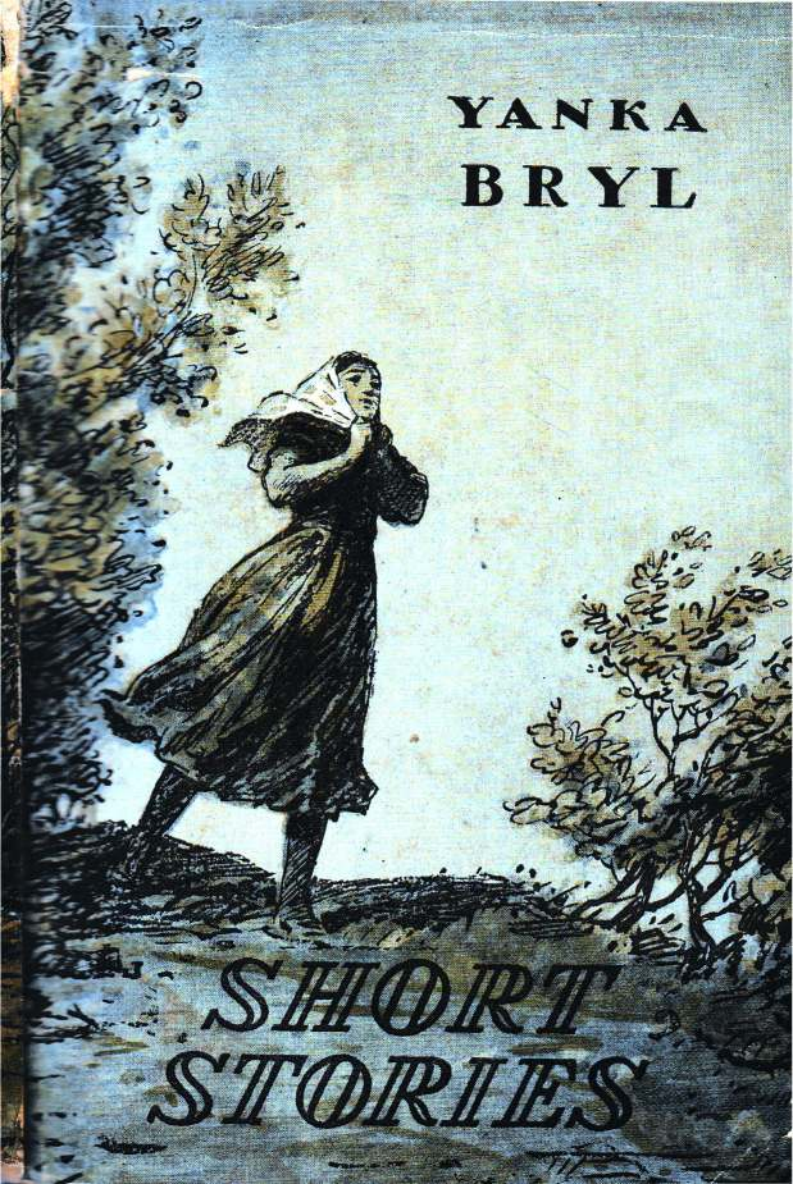
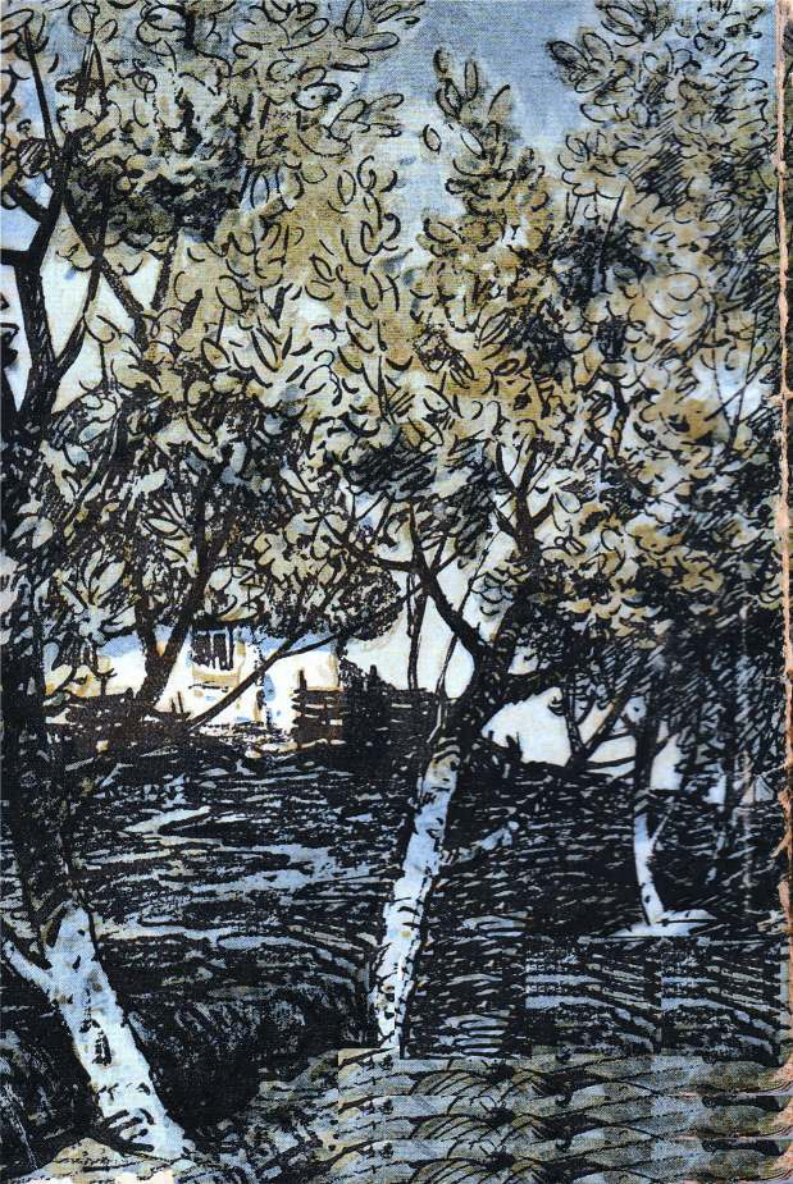
YANKA
BRYL



SHORT STORIES



There was a moment when life parted two ardent lovers, dark-eyed Galya, a poor peasant girl, and Seryozha Yurochka, a gay accordionist, bringing tragedy into the girl's life. Her sun was clouded over when she lost her love—her most precious possession.

The tragic story of this girl, who spent the best years of her life with a man she despised, is told by Yanka Bryl in *Galya.* In this story he shows how Galya's undivided love for Yurochka carries her through a stern ordeal.

A different solution of the love theme is given in *The Girl with Black Eyebrows.* A young lumber-jack falls in love at first sight with vivacious Marya Surnovich, and this feeling for her grows stronger and deeper. They live, work, and spend their leisure hours together among a friendly Soviet collective, and find great and lasting happiness.

With the observant eye of an artist, Yanka Bryl notices diverse human emotions and recreates them in the life of his heroes. Warmly and with great feeling he tells the story of a young printer (*Lazunok*), who happily helps to create books.

Yanka Bryl's short stories reveal the depths of human nature and pose essential problems of the contemporary life of Soviet people.

Yanka (Ivan Antonovich) Bryl, the son of a railroad worker, was born in 1917 in Western Byelorussia, a territory held by Poland for many years when that country was ruled by landlords.

Life was bitter in the "eastern outskirts," as the landlord invaders contemptuously called the western regions of Byelorussia. The Byelorussian language was forbidden and all Byelorussian schools, clubs, theatres, libraries, and publishing houses were gradually closed. The future writer witnessed all this in his childhood and youth.

Yanka Bryl gave Byelorussian literature his own themes and personalities, drawing from the life in which he was brought up.

When the frontier, forcibly dividing the Byelorussian people, was broken down forever during the historic days of September 1939, Yanka Bryl came forward as a sincere portrayer of the life of his people and as an original historian of his beloved Western Byelorussia. He understands and keenly feels the beauty of his native tongue. His stories contain a great deal of warm-hearted poetry, love for people and respect for their activities.

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YANKA BRYL

SHORT STORIES

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE
Moscow

TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN
BY DAVID SKVIRSKY

DESIGNED BY O. KOROVIN

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GALYA

IN THE days of the gentry, it had been a farm-stead. Immediately beyond the orchard there had been six dessiatins of good fields, a big new threshing floor, two cow-houses, and a little cottage built in the old style. The thatched roof, sloping on four sides and green with moss, hung low over the tiny dim windows so that the cottage frowned at the world like its master, old Danka Khamenok, whose head seemed to have grown into the shabby old winter hat which, if he was to be believed, had once been an astrakhan hat bought in the city.

That hat was still lying somewhere in the attic, but Danka Khamenok was buried on a grassy hillock under the pines. All that was left of the farm-stead was the orchard, a creaking sweep over the framework of the well, and the small cottage.

Of the Khamenok family only the daughter-in-law, Galya, and her children, a boy and a girl, remained in the cottage.

It was a serene evening in August. The sun had set. Galya's son, Antos, had gone to the thresher in the field. The leaves on the crown of the old linden-tree behind the kitchen-garden had lost their glow and the starlings had flown away, taking their noisy chatter to the village. After the evening milking the cow was lying on a bed of fresh straw under a shed behind the porch. In the cottage, black-haired little Sonechka was sitting at the table and washing down a piece of bread with fresh milk. Like all children who tended cattle, her thin, tanned legs were covered with stubble scratches. She had washed them in cold water from the well, and now they were tingling all over. She kept rubbing them against each other and swinging them under the high stool.

Sonechka was in a talkative mood.

"Mummy," she said, "Lyonya Stepanov teased me today. 'You're gentry,' he said. 'You own a farm-stead.' Why did he say that? Why did he laugh at me?"

Galya was leaning against a small cupboard, half sitting on it. On the wall above her head was an old clock with some foreign words on its dusty face. In the many years that it had been hanging here no one had bothered to find out what they meant. But then, only the men-folk and Galya knew how to tell the time. Her mother-in-law had lived seventy years without ever

thinking of the date, let alone the time. The minute hand had fallen off during the war and the hour hand had stopped two or three weeks ago.

It was harvest time and Galya's arms, tanned to the elbows, were aching with weariness. She felt as if she was still in the field. Heavy sheaves, bound by nimble fingers, passed endlessly before her eyes, piling up on the stubble. The rattle of the reaper, words, snatches of song, laughter, the murmur of the rye and the rustle of straw still echoed in her ears.

"Mummy, why?"

Galya tried to remember what her daughter had been saying.

"Why what?" she asked, puzzled.

But Sonechka provided the answer herself. "He said they live in the village and we live on a farm," she repeated through a full mouth. "He said Grandfather and Daddy were gentry and that I am, too."

"Tell him he's a foolish boy," Galya said in a tired, dull voice.

She wanted to add something, but stopped. Again her ear caught the hubbub that for a moment had died away. Again, as she stood here under the clock, a part of her seemed to be still out in the fields.

"Get on with your supper, dear," she said. "Finish it quickly. It's time you went to bed."

"Are you going anywhere, Mummy?"

"I'll soon be back."

Beyond the cherry-trees Galya stopped and leaned her hands and breast against the grey cross-bar of the old fence. She looked out over the fields, her feet wet with the cold dew, her gaze fixed somewhere far, far away. Grasshoppers were chirping in the wheat, which spread like a sea right up to the cherry-trees. Farther off to the right stood great piles of flax still warm with the sun and as fragrant as freshly crushed oil seeds. High above the wheat, the flax and the rich, calm earth floated the full, contented moon.

But all this meant little, it was all meant to carry the distant drone over the fields. Somewhere out there he was sitting behind the steering wheel, he, to whom alone she longed to cry with all the pain in her heart, with all her deep sorrow:

"Ser-yo-zha-a! Ser-yozh-ka-a!"

Long ago he had ceased to be Seryozha, and become Sergei.* He had surely long forgotten, erased from his memory all thought of the past. Now he was Seryozha for somebody else. And you, foolish one, you can cry your heart out till it bleeds, remembering the past....

But there had been a time when he had been

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* *Seryozha*—intimate form of the name Sergei.—*Tr.*

Seryozha for her. But that was long, long ago! No, no, it seemed only yesterday.

Galya was just growing out of girlhood when the tailors who made sheepskin coats, two burly, morose brothers, came to their village of Garositsa from Kostyuki. Both wore fine sheepskin coats, as though to disprove the old saying that a shoemaker always goes barefoot. Both wore huge hats that seemed to have been made of whole sheepskins, both were in bast shoes and both had moustaches.

"Girls, look! The Torbas are here!" cried one of the girls spinning tow, as she glanced out of the window.

The tailors were Tymokh and Tikhon Torba and people who knew them only slightly could never tell one from the other.

"And there's a lad with them, girls! My but he's handsome! And he's got an accordion!"

Indeed, a young fellow was walking with the tailors—a mere boy! He wore a short jacket, topboots, and had an accordion slung over his shoulder. One of the girls rapped on the window with her spindle. He must have heard for he turned, waved a "Good day!" to them with a laugh.

He might have come in, but one of the Torbas, the one carrying a yardstick, also looked round, said something and the lad moved on. It was strange to the girls, and to everybody else

in the village for that matter, that one of the Torbas should have such a son—so fair, so well knit, so unlike these two burly, moustachioed brothers.

He turned out to be their nephew, an orphan from a distant village. His name was Sergei, and his surname—Yurochka*—was as odd as that of his uncles, but it suited him. So some people called him Seryozha and others Yurochka.

What a gay, attractive lad he was, that Yurochka! His uncles, big as they were, could settle down in the smallest cottage. They would take off their hats and sheepskin coats and, with only their moustaches to uphold their dignity, set to work, breathing hard over their sheepskins. They were a silent pair. But for Yurochka any room was too small. Not for him alone, of course, but for him and his accordion. Sometimes his patience did not last till the evening; he would stick his needle in his shirt, wind the thread round it, glance at his uncles and reach for his accordion. He liked to have his things in order. His accordion was not kept any old way, but was always wrapped up in his aunt's shawl. He would untie the shawl and there his accordion would be, always polished and shining. The moment he

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* *Yurochka*—intimate form of the common first name Yuri.—*Tr.*

would start playing the room would seem to grow bigger.

He would play a dance, a second one, and his uncles would listen in silence. Then the elder Torba, Tymokh, the one who always carried the yardstick, would remark in his deep bass:

"Maybe that's enough, Sergei? Maybe people don't like it?"

Yurochka's reply would be to swing from a waltz into *Mikita.*

That would instantly bring the spirit of youth into the room. As for the girls they were always ready to spring up from their seats and go into a whirlwind dance, wide skirts flying. The master himself, if not too old, would start beating time with his foot. Even the grandmother, so old that she could remember the corvée, would peer down from her bed on the Russian stove.... And Yurochka would shake his forelock and sing:

Mikita milks the cow,
And his missus feeds the sow.
Mikita! Mikita!
Put a skirt on, Mikita!

A fine, ringing voice he had, that accordion-player.

His uncles were the only ones to listen in silence, without even pausing in their work. But you would hardly say they were not enjoying it,

especially if you knew that it was they who had bought the accordion for Sergei.

That had been a gay month in Garositsa. They had dances every evening! It was a pity that there were not enough sheepskins to keep them there the whole winter!

Yes, it had been a wonderful time for everybody ... for Galya especially.

But that was all long ago.

Now, the full moon was shining peacefully over the field. Galya's feet were wet with the cold dew, and her shoulders chilled under her thin frock. The tractor rumbled on in the distance. How could she forget the days when Seryozha had been her Seryozha? How bitter, how painful was the knowledge that they were gone! They were now a part of the past—the days when they had loved each other ardently, kissed so passionately. It had lasted for only a week, and a week has but seven nights.

Galya fell in love with him first. She was afraid to admit it even to herself, ashamed to look at him too often lest people might notice and guess her secret. She was the youngest of the girls, an orphan. Her mother, the poorest woman in the village, had always been called Marila the Farm-Hand. Galya had never known her father. Perhaps he was alive today, never giving a thought that he had a daughter. Sometimes in her childhood the boys would hurl the

epithet "bastard" pitilessly at her, but as time passed, the name fell away like husks from grain. Galya grew up to be very lovely and, as in an old song, this loveliness was all the poor orphan had. Her hands and feet were small and slender, her fine black eyebrows arched over large brown eyes, her red kerchief, embroidered with golden ears of wheat, was tied in a special way over her thick, raven locks. There was something very essential and rare in her modest sweetness that drove the village lads out of their wits. And when Galya danced, you could not tear your eyes off her!

At first that was all Yurochka could do. He watched and played his accordion tirelessly. Of course everybody likes to dance to good music but for a long time there was no one who could take Seryozha's place. One Sunday, however, Styopka Chernogreben, a good hand at the accordion, came from a neighbouring village. Styopka had no accordion of his own at that time, and Yurochka placed his new one on the lad's knee. Yurochka asked, smiling politely: "How about a polka?" and the other replied gladly: "Sure, I'll try. . . ."

Styopka started to play. Not as well as Sergei, but the polka *Galka* went off with a swing.

Yurochka tossed his head, shook himself like a sparrow released from the hand, settled his belt over his embroidered shirt and made his way

to the corner where the girls were sitting. Everybody in the crowded room waited to see whom he would choose, and the girls waited with shining eyes and beating hearts—"He's coming to me. . . ." But Seryozha went straight up to Galya. He bowed, simply and easily like everything he did, and then looked at her with a smile that was both happy and appealing. "Here is our dance, at last!"

They stepped out into the circle and took each other's hands.

The men rose, the women in the corners pressed forward against those in front, the young men and girls fell silent, waiting for something unusual.

Yurochka, his face glowing, waited for the beat, stamped and whirled. At moments his feet seemed barely to touch the floor, at others, on a turn, they beat out a sharp tattoo. Beside his fair hair, the rosy face framed in the red kerchief flashed by, never long enough to be seen—the golden ears of wheat on the red background, the black eyebrows, and the lips that could not hold back a bashful, happy smile. Everybody saw it and Yurochka more than the others.

"Keep back!" shouted the lads, though not one of them thought of joining in himself.

But the circle round the dancing pair grew smaller as those at the back pressed forward.

Grandad Roman Kruglyak climbed on a

bench in his *valenki* and stood with a hand raised as though ready to join in with a wild shout of delight.

As though feeling this general admiration, Yurochka caught up the song:

Little jackdaw,
Little jackdaw,
You are mine,
You are mine!...

There were shouts of "Right, Yurochka! Right!" A sense of lightness, of release filled the cottage and only then, as though feeling that now everything was all right did the other young people join in the dance.

It was only the prelude to the great happiness which had to come, which was born that night when he kissed her again and again by the window and Galya covered her face with hands, whispering:

"Don't, Seryozha dear, don't...."

But he had no difficulty in parting those hands, and though they stood there in the snow until it was nearly morning they could not drink their fill of happiness, of ardent, intoxicating happiness.

A week later Yurochka and his uncles returned to Kostyuki. Who could have thought that the parting was forever!

And now all that was left for her to do was to stand by the fence and listen to the busy rumble of his tractor somewhere beyond the wheat and the piles of pulled flax. Recall your first love, rave, and cry out to him to make him remember and come back to you. Once as a girl you glowed with warmth standing with him in the snow, and now you stand alone, your feet are chilled by the summer dew. Go back, foolish woman, into the house. You can gain nothing by standing here. Let his tractor drone in the distance and keep you awake until dawn.

Quietly, Galya went in.

The doors of the porch, the kitchen, and the living-room were old and creaky. No matter how careful you were, they cried out like a heart in pain. It was dark in the cottage. Some of the windows faced south and others east, but under the overhanging eaves those windows were like eyes in a gloomy face that see only the ground underfoot. Galya groped to the corner where the bed stood, unfastening her frock as she went. Slipping off her clothes, she felt for the edge of the bed and lay down carefully. But her care was unnecessary—Sonechka was still awake, staring into the darkness, her cheek pillowed on her hand. Galya stroked the thin, warm shoulders and drew her daughter closer.

"Mummy, where's Dad?"

"Go to sleep, little one, he'll return soon."

"You always say that. You said it when I was little and you still say it. Mummy, is Dad a good man?"

"Of course, he is."

"But Lyonka, the fool, says that Dad isn't in the city, that he's in prison, and that he's a ... what's it called, Mummy?"

"What?"

"Oh, what was it? I've forgotten!..."

"Go to sleep, or you won't want to get up in the morning."

"But Lyonka says...."

"That's enough!" cried Galya, herself surprised by her sudden passion.

The girl started, then lay still. This was the proper moment for her to start crying, hurt by her mother's sharp tone, but she lay quietly for a while, then her thin arms wound round Galya's neck, and with a strangely irresistible strength she drew her mother to her.

"I'll go to sleep, Mummy. And you go to sleep too. All right?"

"All right. Only turn over to the wall. There, that's it."

Galya had to force the words out. But the little girl finally quietened down. That was good. Better for her and for her mother, too.

"She's too young to see my tears, to know my thoughts about the man who, unfortunately,

became her father and my husband. We'll go to sleep, little one, that'll be better. . . ."

The quiet round moon rode high over the cottage roof. The tractor had stopped somewhere beyond the wheat fields and the fragrant flax. Sleep, Galya, rest while the moon is still in the sky. Sleep, sleep, waste no time, while the tractor driver and his mate have stopped for a smoke. But of course Galya could not sleep, she did not even try. And again the tractor began to drone, again its busy sound swelled and rolled across the fields like waves.

"Mummy, I've just remembered the word. Dad's a 'pro-fi-teer'. . . . What's that, Mummy? Mummy, are you asleep?"

Galya said nothing. But her thoughts made reply.

"The trouble is not only that he's a profiteer. But I'll keep silent for the time being. Better go to sleep and don't let such things worry you. Let your mother think—she deserves it, she is to blame. . . ."

Yurochka never returned to Garositsa, either to make sheepskin coats or to kiss his Galya. Soon after their parting, Sergei, a member of the Young Communist League, was thrown into prison. When he came back to his village in September 1939, he learned that his sweetheart had married another.

How did it happen that young Mikola Kha-

menok, Danka's son, married Galya, the daughter of Marila the Farm-Hand? On the face of it there was nothing very surprising about it. He fell so violently in love that he married her against his parents' wishes. Many a girl would have married him in Galya's place. A fine farmstead, and a handsome lad. True, his father was a churlish fellow, but she was not marrying him. And then, he would not live forever.

But Galya knew a different side of it. Mikola had been pestering her for a long time, even before Sergei Yurochka came. The news of Sergei's arrest and Galya's bitter tears had filled him with glee. At first she would not hear of him, but after a time the sharp edge of her grief became dulled. Every evening Mikola insistently pressed his suit, even shedding tears and threatening to take his own life or to kill both himself and her.... There was nobody she could turn to. The whole village talked about the good match. Her mother and relations were on his side. He took her almost by force, and the light went out of her life. Nothing was left for her but to weep and marry him in silence, to seek in him a refuge from disgrace. She was scarcely more than a child when she entered Danka's house. From the first day the crusty old man never called her anything but "bastard." When she could no longer conceal that which became obvious earlier than people had a right to expect,

she heard nothing but the old man's scolding and the words: "Slut, beggar."

There was especial venom in the last word. Galya was a quick and good worker, but that was not enough for him. Danka lived and toiled for one thing only—to get rich. He lived for his barn. The old farm-house and his own head under its worn, greasy hat meant far less to him than that barn. It must always be filled to bursting. To fill it, he must have fields. The more fields he had, the fuller the barn would be. The less you slept, the more you could work. The less you ate, the less you wore—the more would remain over. When he prepared to marry off his son, he altered and extended the barn to make room for the sheaves from his daughter-in-law's fields. But the lad lost his senses.... Danka never regarded Galya as a member of the family, she merely took the place of a hired labourer. However hard she worked, he was never satisfied. Whatever she did she could never make up to him for the disappointment, the injury, the loss to his farm for which she was responsible.

Mikola differed from his father only at the beginning, before the wedding. As soon as she passed over the threshold of the house, he showed himself to be his father's son.

As for old Danka.... Only three times did she ever hear a kind word from him.

The first time was just after the wedding.

Her mother-in-law boiled potatoes in their jackets and put them on the table. Danka took off his hat, combed his hair with his fingers, crossed himself and sat down.

"Melt a little butter," he ordered his wife.

Galya's mother-in-law was a quiet, submissive woman. For forty years she had toiled in silence, like a patient uncomplaining old horse. She went to the store-room and returned with one spoonful of butter. It was not enough for a panful of potatoes, but it was too much for her to go back and dip her spoon in the pot again. In any case it was not the custom in that house. So the old woman decided to trick the new member of the family: she turned her back to the table and slipped three spoonfuls of hot water into the butter. Everybody saw it, but nobody spoke. Galya was amazed. Mikola even felt uncomfortable, but the old man was delighted—first with his wife's ruse, and secondly, because nobody appeared to have noticed it. With the blackened nails of his long unwashed hands he peeled the jacket off a potato, screwing up his eyes, and silently dipped it into the "butter." The more he bit off the potato, the deeper he dipped his fingers into the liquid.

"Help yourself, daughter, don't stand on ceremony," he said. "You never had this at home. You grew up in a poor house. Dip your potato."

It was one summer night six months later

that she again heard a kind word. Mikola was out, the old woman was groaning on the stove, and the old man was pottering about the yard. Then he rapped on the window with his dirty claws and quite unexpectedly called her by her name:

"Galya!"

She jumped.

"Come here, Galya!"

Surprised, she went out. "What on eartn can he want?" The old man hurried along the path to the cherry orchard. There he stopped. Galya followed him and stopped at a little distance.

"What a night, eh?" the old man said. "And smell that clover, Simon's, damn him. Look how many stacks he's got! Go and get another sack," he added. "Then we'll both go again and get some more.... Where'll you find an extra bit when winter comes?"

He held an empty sack under his arm.

"I've never stolen yet," she said. "If you haven't enough of your own, go and get it yourself."

She turned and went back to the house without stopping to listen to his scolding. She knew it all by heart. No wonder he removed his hat only to cross himself before the icon, and took off his boots once a week, on Saturdays. No wonder he had built such a large barn.

The third time he chose to be kind to her was

when Antos was born. It was a difficult birth and Galya was in bed for a whole week.

"We ought to kill a hen," Galya's mother-in-law said on the third day.

This thought, born out of an understanding of pain, did not appeal to Danka. He was also unmoved by the insistence of his son—usually so obedient and sensible—that a fowl really must be killed. There was a hen that had stopped laying and clucked about the yard under the window as though begging for the knife. Wife and son held their ground. And there was that woman, damn her, lying in bed just at reaping time. The old man enticed the hen into the porch, shut the door, drove her into a corner, caught her and seized the axe. The execution was carried out on the step. Danka found a piece of string, tied the legs, brought the hen into the cottage, and flung it on the floor, saying:

"There! Eat it!"

This was on September 16, 1939—the last day the gentry were in power.

They fled, but the Khamenoks stayed. Danka did not last long. That winter he couldn't sleep, he never undressed and even left his hat on when he crossed himself.

"It's the end—the end of the world," he groaned as he lay on the stove.

In the spring the old man was at last carried out of the house, feet first. The next day

Mikola threw the old hat into the attic and began to run things himself. A year later the old woman died.

...The tractor droned in the distance and the moon hung high in the sky. The tractor would work all night and the moon would give light to the driver until daybreak. Dark-haired Sonechka's warm breath fanned her mother's shoulder. She had been asleep for a long time now. She had remembered the word which the lads on the pasture called the father she scarcely knew. Let her sleep in peace, in ignorance.

Galya rose to get a drink in the kitchen, but changed her mind and went to the window. It was tightly closed, was not made to open, yet the drone of the tractor, working tirelessly beyond the sea of collective-farm wheat and flax, was louder here.

"Seryozha!" Galya whispered, her lips dry and parched. "Seryozha, come to me, come if it's only to ask for a drink...."

No, he would not come.

He had entered this house only once.

It was at the beginning of 1944.

At about midnight the Khamenoks were awakened by a rapping on the window. In those days only the partisans were masters of the land at night. Galya went to open the door. On occasions like this, her husband never rose from his bed.

Two men followed Galya into the house, the others remained outside, with the horses. Galya turned up the wick of the lamp and then withdrew into a corner. Her part was finished, the talking would be done by Khamenok.

"Good evening! Are you ill?"

"Yes, comrades, you know how it is with this. . . ."

"Heart?"

"No, not exactly, well, I don't know how to explain."

"Ulcer?"

"Well, you see, comrades. . . ."

"Fretted yourself sick about your country, is that it? Don't get up, don't bother. I know you want to show me a lot of certificates."

The partisan flashed on his electric torch, and Khamenok blinked in its light.

"Everything as it should be," the partisan said. "The sickness is taking its normal course. He has let his beard grow, his boots are hidden, and there is plenty of home-brewed vodka in the house. . . ."

Khamenok interpreted this in his own way.

"Yes, there's a drop of it somewhere, comrades. I'm glad you reminded me."

"Lie down, lie down, Khamenok. Don't get up. Keep your liquor. The nazi police will be along tomorrow, and maybe Herr Feldwebel, too.

Keep your song-and-dance for them, you blackguard."

"You don't believe me, comrades...." Mikola began.

"We don't need to believe, we've got eyes in our heads," the partisan cut him short. "The people see through you. They've got your case history written up, beard or no beard. Your homebrew gets you away with everything. The people are torn and bleeding, while you.... Twisting like a snake. Trying to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds. But why waste words on you! Where's your horse? Get up!"

Still pretending to be ill, Khamenok rose heavily and sat on the edge of the bed.

"Galya, give me my *valenki*."

She did not want to leave her corner. She would have liked to throw them at him, those ragged felt boots torn to make him look poor, to throw them at that red beard he had grown. She could have wept with shame and anger.... But she took the *valenki* off the stove and brought them to him, holding them before her to hide so far as she could that she was again expecting a child.

"There," she jerked out in a choked voice.

Then he, Seryozha, turned and said:

"Good evening, Galya! Are you hiding from us too?"

Foolish woman, why did you not cry out to

him: "Take me with you, my darling!" Why did you not call him by the name that was dearer than any on earth—Seryozha? Why? Because words and tears were stifled in bitterness and shame.

"Good evening," she said, dropping her eyes.

It was well that the room was dim in the lamplight and he did not turn his torch on her. Evidently he still had some respect for her.

She did not follow them out to the shed, but remained in the porch by the open door. Huddled in her unfastened jacket, she listened, no, drank in every word of these young, free, happy men.

All Khamenok's cunning came to nothing. For two days he worked to make a hollow in a stack of straw and for three months, a healthy well-fed mare fretted in the darkness. Now one of the young fellows came along, kicked what must have been a bucket and chanted like a priest:

"Where are you, sinful soul? Come out into the light!"

The mare replied with a snort, and there was a burst of laughter on the threshing floor.

Khamenok continued to whine.

"She's not as good as she looks. No wind. No legs to speak of."

"I'll be blowed, the horse's got only four legs, just think of it, lads!" came a pleasant, laughing voice—it sounded as though its owner

was one of those gay Ukrainian lads who sang so well. "Well, Comrade Commander," he said, "It's my bad luck, I'll have to carry out orders. Shall I saddle her?"

"Yes, Artyom, only be quick about it." That was Seryozha's voice.

"He's the commander. I knew it!" Galya thought with involuntary joy.

The man they called Artyom took the saddle off a small horse and put it on the mare.

"Whoa—stand still, my beauty—steady," he cried. "I'll leave you my Chaly, you there with the beard. But see you don't stick him in that hole of yours. I'll be along to see how you feed him. He's done a good job, that horse. Well—I'm off."

He put his foot into the stirrup and jumped up, his silhouette standing out against the white snow as he controlled the prancing mare.

"Good-bye, Shaggy Beard!" another partisan shouted. "Better get that rat's nest off your face. We'll be coming along sometime to see. A shave now and then's good for you!"

"Don't listen to him. You can keep bees in it."

"That's it. There'll be no honey, but you won't oversleep!"

"Follow me!" came Sergei's voice again.

They rode off, leaving Khamenok holding the bridle of the exhausted horse they had left behind. As the sound of their young laughter and

the clatter of hooves on the cobbled road faded into the distance, it raised its head and sent a long, sad whinny after them.

"Come back to bed, it's no good standing there crying," Khamenok mumbled from under the blankets. "D'you think I'm not just as upset as you are? To lose a mare like that, damn their eyes!"

"Go to the devil!" cried Galya, and climbed up on the stove.

Khamenok was silent, but not for long.

"Aha!" he said maliciously in the darkness. "So it's him, that gallows-bird, you're crying about! Well, you just wait, my beauty!"

He was still ready with threats, even then, when alien rule was nearing its end and the bright day of happiness was in clear sight.

... Outside the sky was paling, and the full silver moon was turning white as its work was drawing to a close and it prepared to surrender the heavens to the sun. And still the tractor droned on....

"Come to me, Seryozha, come just once more! Just for one last time!"

Galya gazed into the distance, leaning against the window-sill with her weight on her folded arms.

The sound seemed to be approaching. Yes, it was coming closer, closer with every minute.

"Come to me, my darling, come back from where you went with the music of your accor-

dion and the clatter of hooves on the road, from that happy land where you stayed so long!

He *was* coming!

The tractor had stopped. There was silence.

Galya straightened up and walked away from the window. With an involuntary movement she smoothed her hair and hid her face in her hands.

Sergei was coming ... young and gay as in the old days. Only now he would be in his blue, oil-stained overalls, a cap in his hand, but with the same lock of fair hair over his laughing blue eyes. Wasn't that the grass whispering, wasn't that the sand on the path gritting under his feet? Now he would reach out his hand and tap softly on the window—and the past would fade out.

"Come, oh come, I've been waiting so long ... so long!..."

But what was that?

The tractor began to roar again.... Drawing away, farther away with every minute. How simple to explain: it must have made a turn. How simple and how dreadful!... Sit down again by the window, sit there and listen. Scream in anguish, or sit and gaze in silence—it's all one. Though there is another thing you can do—weep.

Galya chose to weep, though there was no choice—the tears came of themselves. Sinking

her head down to the window-sill, she wept with bitter, tearing sobs, wept like an unhappy child left alone in a dark, strange room. And like a child exhausted with tears, her sobs at last died into deep shuddering sighs, weariness pressed down her eyelids with a soft hand and quieted her troubled heart. And Galya slept....

The rolling wheat fields, a sea of collective-farm grain, stretched out beyond the orchard. Mist lay upon them in a heavy blanket and through it peered the summer sun, a red orb, announcing that on this day, Sunday, it too was resting and wished to let all living things rest from its scorching heat.

Such wheat had never been seen in these parts before. Only a short time ago the land had been patterned with boundaries and narrow strips of field. Now the wheat rolled softly away into the distance with hardly a ripple, the stiff heavy ears warm and slightly damp with the mist. Grand wheat! Just what was wanted. Another blow at those who were against a life of peace and happiness, another joy for honest hearts. Fussy grey sparrows chirped merrily as they flew about, alighting on the heavy ears like bees on flowers. But bees were always busy, humming their quiet song as they worked, while the sparrows were simply happy and carefree. A giddy tribe!

The tractor continued to drone and boom in the distance....

Who had replaced Sergei, the accordion-player, on the driver's seat?

Galya's son Antos was washing by the well in the yard. He had drawn a bucket of cold water, taken off his shirt and was splashing and snorting with the highest enjoyment. He was a fine, lively lad and a good worker. It was well that he was so keen at work, so eager to study, so natural and friendly with everybody. He already understood that he had no cause to blame anybody or anything for his father's fate. "Blame yourself, you old fool. Your son is not going to hide his head because of you. Mother, though—that's another matter." Antos rubbed himself dry with a clean linen towel, until it seemed one could almost hear it rubbing his bronzed face and strong arms that had so well earned their rest.

Galya dearly loved her little Sonechka. She herself had never been photographed in childhood—who would ever have thought of such a thing in the Farm-Hand's family. It was a wonder that there was a mirror. Looking now at Sonechka, Galya seemed to see herself in that mirror again. That was how she must have looked long ago—large eyes, raven hair, and twittering like a sparrow.

Sonechka stood on the bed in her clean shirt.

Smiling, still sleepy-eyed, she held out her thin brown arms. Galya slipped on her bodice and fastened it, her nimble fingers running quickly down the white buttons. The little girl's warm arms wound tightly round her mother's neck, and the black head sank down on her shoulder. How Sonechka would have liked to rest it on her pillow again! But never mind, she was quite ready to get up too. She knew that at harvest time she had to take Antos' place with the cow. Burenka, her friend, a gentle, quiet cow, was already coming across the dewy grass, and the shining jug of milk was standing on the table beside her mug.

"Mummy, did we sleep together?"

"Yes, dear, we fell asleep together...."

"Mummy, is it Sunday today?"

"Yes. And you're going to put on your new frock. Look, there it is."

"Will you be going to the fields? The rye is cut.... Now it's the oats and wheat. Antos is going too."

"He is taking a nap. He was out threshing all night."

"Antos is big. Now, isn't he, Mummy? He's a good boy, isn't he?"

"A very good boy, Sonechka."

"And am I good too, Mummy? Do tell me."

"You're a very good girl, my darling. The best of us all."

Galya held out the clean, freshly ironed knickers, then drew the dear, warm little body into her arms. "You're my sunshine!" she thought. "Why aren't you the daughter of the man I love?"

From the distant fields came the hum of that tireless worker, the tractor.... Who was sitting at the wheel now? Who had taken Seryozha's place?

"I thought and thought and thought last night, and then I remembered that word—'pro-fi-teer'! What does it mean, Mummy?"

"You'll understand when you're a little bigger, dear, and then I'll tell you all about it. And till then you'll be a good girl, won't you, and stop asking about it?"

"Yes, Mummy."

...Galya was walking past the wheat, over the dew-drenched grass, to the fields.

"No, he's not only a profiteer," her thoughts still running on her talk with her little girl. "He's a coward, vicious, petty, rotten to the core. He was never your father, my little girl, he was never my real husband. Never!"

She remembered his beard. Unkempt, red, big enough for the bees to build a hive in. The day after the mare was taken, he had sat for a long time before the spotted mirror, scraping at it with a blunt razor, groaning, cursing, but scraping. After that he had shaved once a week until the Soviet Army arrived. Every night he

had expected the partisans to come and see if he had shaved off his beard. Of course they never came and he did not change. He went to the front and somewhere he got a bullet through his arm. And how he had paraded that arm, thrusting it under everybody's nose to show he was for Soviet power too! Meanwhile he speculated on yeast, getting it from Stolbtsi and Minsk....

He was finally exposed and had been in prison for more than three years now.

Perhaps she ought to feel sorry for him. After all he was the father of her children, they had lived many years together.... But no, she had no pity for him, had never felt even a flicker of it! And quite right!...

That drone.... Soon the mist would lift and beyond the wheat, beyond the flax she would see the dark expanse of fresh, fragrant plough-land, would see how much her Seryozha had turned up during the night.

She saw somebody coming along the road.

Seryozha!...

Galya wanted to run, run to him, but instead she stopped and gazed. He was hatless, in blue overalls open at the throat, exactly as she had pictured him in the night.

"No, he mustn't see me!..."

Leaving the stubble, she slipped into the wheat.

Sergei approached, but her white kerchief merged with the mist and he could not see her. He was not even looking her way. Galya's sad brown eyes followed him until he disappeared.

"Turn back, just for a moment, my darling, my lost youth! Turn back, sing me your merry song about the little jackdaw who is yours, still yours. Look in my eyes and I will burn down that farm-house with my own hands, take the children and follow you anywhere, anywhere!..."

But the wheat—what wonderful wheat that is all around her—thick, tall, with never a weed.... Just what was wanted!

It was less a thought than a feeling. Galya's supple, hard hand passed over the ears, and their soft touch seemed to bring an ease and lightness to her heart....

What are you pleading for, why ache so vainly, my heart? May he live happily, happily, my Seryozha! Can I not bear to live without him, am I of no use to anybody, worse than all others in this free, sunny world?...

"Ivan Stepanovich! Uncle Ivan! Help me, Uncle Ivan!..."

Galya's lips whispered those words, spoken so many times in thought. And Uncle Ivan, kindly, wise Ivan Stepanovich, the chairman of their collective farm, looked at Galya from under his thick grey eyebrows.

"What's the matter, Galya?" he asked.

"Uncle Ivan, I can't go on living there, take me back into our village. Build me a cottage, we'll work it off, Antos and I, we'll work everything off, everything! Take his name from us, Uncle Ivan. You know everything—who he is, who I am and who my children are. . . ."

"Now, don't cry, Galya, there's no need. Don't cry," Uncle Ivan said.

But still Galya cried—walked along the road with tears running down her face. Through the mist and through her tears which concealed from her that farm-stead not yet swept off the earth, she could see thin, brown arms reaching out to her; they wound warmly round her neck, and she could hear a little voice in her ear: "My own dear, good Mummy!"

No, it is you who are good, my sunshine, you are the best of us all! And your life will not be like your mother's. Nobody will abuse it. . . .

Galya walked home. And again in the night she would hear the drone of Seryozha's tractor. Again her soul would ache and ache until the dawn. What matter? So long as it is there—in the fields.

LAZUNOK

IT WAS late at night. The new snow crunched underfoot in the frost. The countless tiny flakes glittered in the quiet, pensive light of the street lamps. Automobiles were few and far between and occasionally a tram, almost empty, clattered by, striking blue sparks out of the wires overhead.

The factory whistles called above the dark ruins and the sparse city lights, and they were answered no less cheerfully by the engines at the railway station or far away on the outskirts.

The big windows of the print-shop were ablaze with light all night long.

The huge building was silent and all the passer-by heard was a hum, muffled by the walls, and sounding very much like the roll of the surf.

That hum came from the printing department.

The giant rotary presses—the do-alls of the printing business—roared. The busy platen machines hissed and clanged. The flat printing

presses thundered with a maddening monotony. Not only their noise alone suggested the surf. These machines, standing side by side and oscillating with a measured clatter, brought to mind the seething foam on the sea-shore, the restless stirring of the pebbles, and the splashing waves that storm the boulders with impotent fury.

The metal lines set by the compositor contain thoughts and images. The galleys—the pages of a future book—are tightly locked in neat frames. Sheets of white paper slip down the chute to the drum. Black rollers slide rhythmically over the type held in the chase. Metal fingers take the printed pages off the drum and place them on the pile growing beside the machine.

This was the first night that Mihas Lazunok was in charge of a flat printing press.

The boy was filled with the joy of labour.

True, the more complicated and responsible part of the job had been done by the foreman; he had lowered and made the frame ready, adjusted the plate, filled the machine with ink and oiled it. All Mihas had to do was to see that the machine ran smoothly, but that did not prevent him from feeling that he was the foreman.

From the eminence of his fifteen years, he gazed down importantly at the machine. There it was, huge and clever, and though he still did not understand many things about it, he was

its master. A turn of that lever would make the giant stop, another turn—and it would begin moving again.

Besides, who was there to stop him from imagining himself the foreman? Ivan Simonovich, the real foreman, was standing three machines away. The presses on either side of Mihas were tended by boys like him; they had all come from the printing trades school—the first class to graduate since the end of the war. The school was on the first floor of the same building, and because of a shortage of workers they had been graduated at the close of the first school-year. They had managed to cover only half of the course. Had it not been for the post-war difficulties they would have made better use of that year. The winter had been cold and much time had been taken up by repairs and the installation of the necessary equipment. The result was that they had come to the print-shop almost novices. But to look at them one would think that like Mihas each considered himself the foreman. Was there any reason why Mihas should be different?

When Ivan Simonovich added one more necessary word—*Lazunok*—to the galley, he gave fresh proof of his trust for Mihas. At the bottom of the galley was the number *3* and inside it—*Yakub Kolas, Quagmire*. The *3* was the number of the signature, *Yakub Kolas*—the name of the author, and *Quagmire*—the book's title.

As the foreman had said, the word *Lazunok*—Mihas' surname—had been put on the galley because today Mihas was responsible for the quality of the printing in the third shift. The author, Yakub Kolas, was responsible for the way the book was written, while Mihas Lazunok—for the way it would be printed. Was that not food for pride?

The final argument in favour of Mihas' maturity was the appointment of an assistant Lyuda Mironchik, a former classmate. Who could dispute his authority now? She was somewhat taller than he, but that did not make her any the less his assistant. Therefore, he could even reprimand her from time to time if he felt like it. For some time he watched her taking the printed signatures off the table and arranging them in a pile. She was doing a good job of it. Was there really nothing he could find fault with?

"I say," he said at last, "don't you think you ought to carry smaller piles?"

"What?" Lyuda asked, the rumble of the machines making her miss his words.

"Are you deaf? Carry smaller piles, I say."

"Why should you care? It's not you who's sweating."

"What do you mean? The work's got to be done efficiently. Do I have to teach you that?"

"O-o! How high and mighty you've become! You had better mind your own job."

That was downright insubordination. But the supply of words worthy of his position had been exhausted and he decided to let it pass in silence. He thrust his hands, smeared with paint and oil, into the pockets of his stained trousers and, spitting contemptuously through his teeth, walked away from the machine.

Tolya Kosenok, the boy tending press No. 7 which stood on Mihas' right, was better known as the "Gypsy." He was only a year older than Mihas, but he was taller than even Lyuda. In general, Mihas was the shortest of the 140 pupils that graduated with him, and that had earned him the nickname of "Space." In the printing business that is the name for a small piece cast lower than the face of the type and used to separate words. Mihas received that nickname early in the school-year, as soon as his classmates learned to use space.

With an important air, his hands still in his pockets, Mihas glanced at the top sheet of the pile the Gypsy was printing. That was no job for a man! What a come-down to be printing forms! Mihas drew a grimy hand from the warmth of his pocket and fingered some of the printed sheets. They were all forms, all right! Mihas returned his hand to his pocket, spat importantly through his teeth once more and stopped to think how he could best impress the Gypsy with the advantages of work like printing

signature 3 of *Quagmire* over, say, other work, like printing forms and receipts. Just as he was about to begin, he heard the grave voice of the foreman calling to him above the rumble of the machines.

"Hey, young fellow! D'you hear me?"

Mihas tore his hands out of the pockets and rushed to his machine.

"What d'you think you're doing, working or window shopping?" Ivan Simonovich asked.

"I'm working, Comrade Foreman," Mihas replied with not so much submission as humbleness in his voice.

"Well, people don't idle about like you when they work. What's this?"

He pointed to three crumpled sheets.

"Rejects, Comrade Foreman," Mihas said, still more humbly.

There was nothing else he could say. The machine seemed to be in collusion with Ivan Simonovich. It had been running smoothly, but the minute Mihas walked away, the "fingers" had for some reason failed to take up the sheets properly and crumpled them, and the third sheet came off the drum torn. The foreman probably had eyes in the back of his head to notice it immediately like that!

When Ivan Simonovich walked away Mihas made up his mind not to leave his machine and kept an eye on the "fingers."

"Comrade Foreman! Comrade Foreman!" a soft voice, muffled by the din of the machines, teased.

Mihas heard, but he did not turn round. He knew it was Lyuda, for she was standing by a pile of papers with her back to him and pretending she was busy.

"Mihas!"

Mihas affected not to hear.

"Comrade Lazunok, what's that you have there? D'you mean to say they're rejects?"

No longer able to contain herself, Lyuda sat down on the pile with a peal of ringing laughter.

To show Lyuda how much he was above all this foolery, Mihas began to whistle indifferently.

When he calmed down a little, he grew silent and thoughtful.

The way people talked you might think there were nothing but rejects! Still....

He remembered the old man he had seen more than a month ago, when he was still in school. It happened during the break, when boredom made Mihas breathe a hole through the ice on the window-pane. That gave him a view of the street and the pedestrians. Three cars passed. Two soldiers in sheepskin coats drove a sleigh close to the pavement. Then Mihas' eye was caught by an old man leaning heavily on a stick and slowly picking his way through the

snow along the high grey wall on the opposite side of the street.

"Take a peep," Mihas offered the Gypsy.

"I suppose you call that fun, eh, Space? I don't see what's making you so happy!" the Gypsy said, nonetheless bending down and looking through the hole.

"Can you see the old man?" Mihas asked.

"Can you see him, can you see.... I not only see him, I know him. He's an author. Yakub Kolas. Once I saw him going into the print-shop. He came about some book or other. Our assistant headmaster pointed him out to me. Look," the Gypsy said, putting his eye to the hole again, "he's going to the print-shop and he's got a briefcase under his arm like the last time."

This was something Mihas could not afford to miss! He seized his cap and ran outside.

To make Yakub Kolas notice a small pupil of the printing trades school, the least the boy should have done was to say: "Hello." But Mihas was tongue-tied. It could not be otherwise! There was much that Yakub Kolas would have had to be told to guess the thoughts that were harassing Mihas.

Above all he would have had to be told that a great heart lived in this small boy from the printing trades school and how this small boy had grown up.

...The war took Mihas out of school when he was only in the fourth grade and instead of continuing his studies he went to the forest with his father to join the partisans. There was the time when he was cut off in an enemy-infested swamp and a police dog found him and dragged him out by his foot.... His youth did not prevent the fascists from first torturing him and then packing him off in a goods van together with the adult prisoners. Now he knew that he had been bound for the Trostyanetski death camp to be burned in the furnaces there. But at the time, like the other prisoners, he knew nothing of his destination. He neither cared to know nor wanted the enemy he hated so much to take him anywhere. He jumped out of the van and rolled down the steep slope of a high embankment like a wounded hare. There had been some firing – nothing more.

Yakub Kolas would have had to be told how Mihas returned home to his collective farm. How he returned with only his mother and his elder sister Vera; his father was away pursuing the enemy.

The small, fourteen-year-old partisan set out for the town as soon as he heard from Lidiya Petrovna, the schoolmistress in the village, that a printing trades school was opening there; she had read about it in the papers. Mihas walked all the forty kilometres and when he reached the

town he wandered about the strange streets looking for the school. While the school was getting the dining-room ready, Mihas often had to go hungry. He shivered from the cold in his old clothes until the pupils were issued uniforms. All this would have had to be told if only to show how persistent Mihas had been to reach his goal. How he would soon be a printer and print the books Grandad Kolas wrote—the tales and poems he loved to read,

Yes, all this should have been told, but poor Space neither dared nor had the time. He was so confused that he even forgot to say: "Hello."

. . Jack Frost had painted fantastic patterns on the big windows of the print-shop. Beyond the windows was the dark, silent night. But in the shop the presses rumbled endlessly, monotonously, like the surf on the sea-shore.

The printed pages moved in a continuous stream from under the drum to the long "fingers." Mihas Lazunok, the little printer, watched them intently and dreamed. . . .

What if the door opened and Grandad Kolas walked in? Mihas pictured him coming up to his press, saying nothing at first, simply taking up the top page and looking at it in silence. Then, when he saw how well Mihas was printing his book, he would say:

"What is your name, laddie?"

"Oh, but that's a lot of nonsense!" Mihas started pleasurably as though shaking off a spell of lazy drowsiness. "There's really no earthly reason for him to come here so late. Besides, he'd have to have a pass. And, anyway, I don't believe he ever comes here."

"Why shouldn't he come, after all?" Mihas asked himself, the dream returning. "He doesn't need a pass. The manager would personally bring him in. I'm printing his book, so why shouldn't he look in? What if he really does. . . ."

But these were only dreams! Yet, even if you didn't believe them, you quickly turned your head to make sure that no one was opening the door. For a minute the dream seemed so feasible that Mihas suddenly found himself tingling with excitement.

He bent towards the press and had the impression that Grandad Yakub Kolas was standing over him and watching. . . . The sensation was so real that he felt a delightful warmth creeping over him.

"Well, how are you getting along, my lad?"

Mihas started. But it was only Ivan Simonovich.

He was looking at Mihas with a smile.

"You see," he said after a brief pause, "you've got to be attentive and not let your imagina-

tion run away with you when you're working. Our business, my lad, is to keep our minds on the job and not to indulge in fancy dreaming. You and I will never write a book like *Quagmire*. But this is the sort of thing that will put us to shame."

The foreman's keenness took Mihas' breath away: the "sort of thing" was a tiny oblong spot between the lines.

"I didn't notice it, Comrade Foreman," Mihas said guiltily.

"Never mind, you'll learn to notice these things after you've worked half as long as I have."

Ivan Simonovich stopped the press with a turn of the lever to the left and while he switched on the lamp over the drawn out chase and looked for and eliminated the cause of the "sort of thing" in the space material, Mihas watched the movements of his big, oil-stained hands.

"Comrade Foreman. . . ."

"Yes?"

"May I take one of those sheets home? I'd like to. . . ."

"D'you like to read?" the foreman asked, his eyes on the chase. Evidently he was unaware that he had fanned the warmest spot in the heart of his small assistant.

"Of course!" Mihas said happily. "I read a lot, Comrade Foreman. Look."

Ivan Simonovich stopped hammering and turned round.

"We work eight hours—that leaves us sixteen," Mihas said, bending one finger at the word "eight" and two at the word "sixteen." "I'm free to do as I please for sixteen hours and that gives me a lot of time for reading."

Ivan Simonovich had a keen eye. Now he instantly saw that the main thing here was not in the "sixteen hours."

"You ought to study, laddie," he said, looking at Mihas warmly.

"I'm definitely going to," Mihas replied enthusiastically. "I'm going to go to an evening school for adults."

While Ivan Simonovich was adjusting the frames, Mihas at last made up his mind to ask about something that was worrying him all the time.

"Could you tell me," he said, dropping into a conversational tone for the first time that day, "if this word—my name—will stay in the book?"

Ivan Simonovich at once guessed what Mihas was driving at.

"Naturally. It was put there to stay."

Ivan Simonovich spoke with a strange smile, but Mihas did not notice it. The foreman's words brought an excited light into his eyes and he smiled happily.

When a few days later the editor-in-chief of the publishing house signed the final proofs of the new edition of Yakub Kolas' book, he reproved the technical editor.

"The general impression is quite good!" he said, turning over the pages of the book. "But, my dear Lazar Mironovich, why can't we completely rid our books of defects? The defects may be trivial, there may be only one or two, but why should they make a point of being there at all? Here, for instance: no defects in the type, so the edges had to be spoiled. Now this will not do at all. Look."

He turned the opened book. A word—*Lazunok*—which had no business being there was printed on the margin of the page.

"Here it is again," the editor-in-chief said, turning over the pages.

The technical editor finally agreed that though it was trivial, it was a defect all the same.

The bearer of that name was the only person who would have never agreed to considering it a defect and unnecessary in the book. There could be no question about it being necessary! Mihas was on tenterhooks until *Quagmire*, the first book he had helped to create, appeared in the book-stall.

The day finally came when he had the book in his hands.

Ivan Simonovich had told him the truth. Mihas saw his name printed several times on the margins of the book. There it was: Lazunok, Lazunok, Lazunok.... It was a pity, though, that here and there the knife had gone through the name, cutting half of it away. But that was not worth bothering about, for in some books the defects were far worse.

Mihas stood near the book-stall for a long time, smiling and endlessly turning over the pages of the book.

THE GIRL WITH BLACK EYEBROWS

HAVE you ever seen the pines in Nalibok? No? Then hold your readiness to praise the ones in your parts, for when you see them you'll say: "Those lads were quite right. The pines are all they said they were. They're beautiful."

I've soldiered all the way from Moscow to Berlin, and before the war I've been beyond Moscow as well. I've seen all sorts of forests in plenty, but now in Nalibok whenever I come up to one of those beauties and glance up at its curly crown I've got to throw my head so far back that my cap slips off on to the snow. When you tap the trunk with the butt end of an axe, it rings from the snow up to its sunny crown. And when you go down on your knees and get at it with a saw, the hot tarry sparks dance all round you—on the snow, on your boots, and on your hands.

They are superb! Magnificent!

And have you ever seen our girls? They take your breath away. I've roamed the world for six years and have never seen their equal.

...People expect Marusya, my rival in emulation, to win the honours, while I.... No, I haven't the least notion of letting her carry the day for I've made up my mind to win both the honours and her. Only I don't know what's going to be the hardest.

I'll tell you how it all happened. It was on the third day when we, my whole team, I mean, were returning to section No. 7 after sliding our first logs into the Niemen. On the way we met some ten sleighs and you could not have told which of the girls on them was more bewitching. You should have heard their chatter, the magpies! The first sleigh had been caught on a snag and nothing would make it budge. Naturally, our lads had to comment.

"You're stuck all right!" Mikola yelled.

"Then why don't you help?" came an answering cry.

"If you'd given your horse some oats he'd have made short work of that snag," Mikola said.

At this point I took it into my head to sing:

Once there was a pretty lass,
She went for fire-wood, but alas!
A wicked snag held fast her sleigh,
So on the road she spent all day.

In the meantime we had turned off the path and came abreast of the girls. One of them

straightened up and walked away from the sleigh towards us. I was so stunned by her beauty that I stopped. To tell you the truth, lads, I had dreamed of meeting a girl like that all the twenty-five years of my life. And here she was approaching me, her eyebrows dark, her fur cap tilted to the side of her head, her sheepskin jacket fitting tight round her waist, and her eyes, I swear it, were as bright as the sun, so bright that they dazzled you.

"You, my lad," she said, "shut your mouth or you'll catch a cold. And look to the collar of your horse. I can see that your father forgot to tighten it when he set you out."

I, blockhead that I am, might not have been caught by that, but they all started roaring:

"Ha, ha, ha! What a driver! And he has the nerve to laugh!"

I bent forward to see if the collar was really loose. It seemed to be all right and just as I got out to take a closer look, my beautiful girl waved her hand at my horse and cried:

"Off you go!"

My Chestnut, as though to spite me, raised her tail and started off at a gallop. I went after it in the snow. But it was hopeless!

That girl made me look a complete fool. It was lucky I managed to tumble into Ales' sleigh. The ringing laughter of the girls followed us....

It was all right for the other lads. They had

their bit of fun and forgot all about it. But I carried the girl away in my heart. Wherever I went, whatever I did, I was never alone for she was always before my eyes. Oh, the sweet misery of it! But that is life. The buds had blossomed in the six years I was away from home! But who was she? Where did she come from?

Soon we moved to the next section, and started to use another road and it seemed I would never again see my black-browed girl.

But the day after the meeting I've told you about, Mikhail Ivanovich Semyonov, the representative from the District Executive Committee, paid us a call and said:

"You had better be on your toes, Comrade Nos, if you don't want to look foolish. The girls' team from the village of Podchashnicheski has challenged you to emulate them. And in case you don't know, they're led by a member of the Young Communist League, Marusya Surnovich."

The idea of girls challenging us naturally raised a laugh. Why, the lads under me were all lions at their work and here some girls' team was....

"Are you serious about the whole thing, Mikhail Ivanovich?" I asked. "There's been a shock month announced and everybody wants to do his very best while you're asking us to compete with a bunch of girls!"

Comrade Semyonov laughed in reply.

"If I were you, lads," Mikhail Ivanovich said, laughing, "I wouldn't count my chickens before they're hatched. This 'bunch of girls' will give you a good run for your money."

"The world is full of surprises," I agreed. "We'll see what comes of it. Tell the girls that we've accepted their challenge, but they'll have only themselves to thank for whatever happens."

"Yes, and tell your Marusya," Tolya, one of our lads, said merrily, "to show us her kerchiefed lumber-jacks. We might consider merging our teams."

We joked about it, had a good laugh and forgot about it. But one day Mikhail Ivanovich paid us another call and with a quiet smile handed me a note folded in a triangle.

"Dear comrades," the note said, "we are very happy that such a distinguished team of lumberjacks as yours has been so kind as to accept our challenge. As regards your request to show you our team, we must tell you that we are not for exhibition. When the time comes we shall show you the results of our work."

There was a postscript:

"I still think that one must know how to tighten a horse's collar, Comrade Team Leader."

The deuce! There you were, Mikola, you had the address right there! I flushed and the lads laughed. I started telling Mikhail Ivanovich about that business over the snag, but he

stopped me with a chuckle for it turned out that he had heard about it from the girls.

"Laugh as much as you like," I thought to myself, "only don't think it was that damned collar that made me flush. No, I flushed because I had finally hit the trail that led to my happiness. Laugh, but he who laughs last laughs best!"

True, at first the girls had us worried. We thought we would take the whole thing in our stride, but imagine our consternation at the production meeting on Sunday when Mikhail Ivanovich, smiling as usual, read the first results of our competition and we learned that where we had fulfilled forty-seven per cent of the month's plan in a week, the girls had walked off with fifty-four per cent. It was a joke no longer!

But the time came when we, too, had a good laugh, at first all the girls and lads together and then only Marusya and I.

We had a meeting on Sunday in one of those villages in the forest where the girls lived. Usually we went home after these meetings, but this time the lads decided to stay. Tolya had his accordion with him and we danced until daybreak.

Dear Marusya! Whenever I think of your laughter and your eyes, I feel like going back to that road where we first met and wait to see you pass and laugh at me as you did then. My brave

girl! You not only grew up while I was away fighting, but you were a partisan and used to go on reconnaissance to distant villages and return to this dense, virgin thicket as to your own home. Now I know why you wear your fur cap and sheepskin jacket so well and why your eyes sparkle so.

I often think of her, but then I would suddenly remember the words:

"We are not for exhibition, we shall show you our work."

What if they really have the laugh on us again?

I burn to swing my axe with all my might and shout:

"Look out, girls, you'll get your money's worth now!"

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